



Letter from France

Words **Loykie Loïc Lominé**

Assessment in France is highly regulated yet the students take few national exams

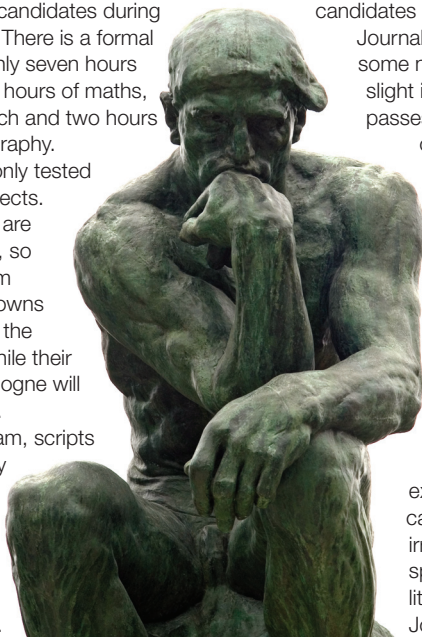
The French assessment system has little in common with the British one. In France, there is no sitting exam after exam for various units and components, no commercial exam boards offering a wide range of subjects and qualifications, no legions of professional examiners busily marking for days on end, no waiting for weeks for exam results, no lengthy analysis of national standards in the media, no league tables of the best and worst-performing schools...

Seen from the UK, the most striking feature of the French assessment system is the relative shortage of national examinations. Only at age 14-15 do students sit their first national exam, to gain the qualification known as the *Diplôme National du Brevet* (or just *Brevet*) at the end of their *collège* years.

The *Brevet* is at the same level as GCSEs and Scottish Standard Grades, yet it is mainly awarded on the basis of the marks received by candidates during the academic year. There is a formal exam, yet it lasts only seven hours over two days: two hours of maths, three hours of French and two hours of history and geography.

Candidates are only tested on those three subjects. Examination topics are set at regional level, so two candidates from two neighbouring towns in Brittany will have the same questions, while their cousins in the Dordogne will have different ones.

Just after the exam, scripts are sent to a nearby town where they are anonymously marked by teachers, on school premises, within a day or two. All marks are then



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compiled, awarding meetings take place a few days later – and the results are published straight away. In other words, candidates know their *Brevet* results within two weeks of the exam.

Baccalauréat preparation

Students attend the *collège* between the ages of 10 and 15, then they progress to the *lycée* where they spend three years preparing for the Baccalauréat. For the Baccalauréat, the end-of-*lycée* diploma that corresponds to A-levels and Scottish Highers, the assessment system is very similar (one paper per candidate per subject, anonymous marking by teachers from the same geographical area) with some minor differences – for example, topics are national and not regional, and examiners mark from home and not from their workplace. Within three weeks, by early to mid-July, all candidates have their results.

Journalists may briefly comment on some national statistics, usually a slight increase in the percentage of passes, or they may portray some outstanding candidates (typically a working-class grandmother who realised her lifetime ambition, or a young asylum seeker who spoke no French when they arrived in the country four years ago).

But the national hobby in the media, year after year, is to review the topics of the philosophy exams. All Baccalauréat candidates must sit these, irrespective of whether their specialisation is sciences, literature or economics. Journalists enjoy picking out the difficulty of such topics

as “Can there be power without violence?” (2001), “Is language only a tool?” (2002) and “Why are we sensitive to beauty?” (2003). To the outsider, these subjects can seem baffling but they are linked to the curriculum and, of course, the students are able to answer them.

The French educational system is heavily centralised and bureaucratic. All programmes and exams are regulated by the Ministry of National Education; through its “academic councils” (at the level of regions such as Brittany) and its “academic inspections” (at the level of counties such as the Dordogne), the ministry controls and oversees the system, and it ensures the swift processing of marks, grades and results.

This highly regulated environment is the second key feature of the French assessment system at secondary school level: not only are national exams quite rare, compared with the UK, but their administration is controlled entirely by the state. However, this model does make perfect sense in a country where all teachers (through from primary school to university) are civil servants directly employed by the ministry.

In terms of assessment as a professional activity, the French system has drawbacks for teachers – they cannot refuse to mark exam scripts and receive little extra pay for this service. The country offers neither earning opportunities for freelance assessors nor career opportunities for examination specialists such as senior examiners... But candidates do receive their results rapidly, which ultimately may be the best criterion on which to judge the quality and efficiency of an assessment system.

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